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A previous unknown 1855 Albion Notice: Whitman Outed as His Own Reviewer

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those horrible hospitals where lay the wounded and suffering of the bloody Crimean war.” See “Editor’s Table,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* (January 1861), 62, as reproduced by American Periodical Series Online.

11 *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 451. Available at the *Walt Whitman Archive* (<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>). Hereafter *LG* 1860.

12 Nasby’s imagined consumption of Whitman-like grass echoes L.M. Sargent’s parody of Emerson in his 1861 pamphlet, “The Ballad of the Abolition Blunder-buss.” Here Emerson flogs his horse, “Pegasus,” who is lazily “indulging in ‘Leaves of Grass,’ by Walt. Whitman.” See Len Gougeon, “Whitman, Emerson, and ‘The Ballad of the Abolition Blunder-buss,’” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 3 (Fall 1985), 21-27.

13 David Ross Locke, *The Nasby Papers* (Indianapolis: C.O. Perrine & Co., 1864), 45-47.

A PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN 1855 *ALBION* NOTICE: WHITMAN OUTED AS HIS OWN REVIEWER

A previously unrecorded notice of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in the September 8, 1855, issue of *The Albion: A Journal of News, Politics and Literature*, a New York weekly that operated from 1822 to 1876.¹ The bulk of the *Albion* article, titled “A Pleasant Quiz,” is a reprint of the review of the first edition that appeared in the September issue of the *United States Review*, a review that in fact Whitman wrote himself and published anonymously. What is striking about the *Albion* article is the short paragraph introducing the reprinted review: “Under the title ‘Walt Whitman and his Poems,’ the *United States Review* recently published the following article. We take it to be a smart satire upon the present tendency of authors to run into rhapsody and transcendentalism; and therefore its main fault in a literary point of view—that it suggests the notion of a man reviewing his own work—is not of much importance.” The *Albion* notice thus becomes the earliest known outing of Whitman as a writer of his own reviews (and manages to accomplish the outing in a subordinate clause). The title of the *Albion* article, “A Pleasant Quiz,” invites the reader to test the self-reviewing hypothesis by reading the *United States Review* piece to see if it doesn’t in fact sound like “a man reviewing his own work.”

Previously, the earliest known outing of Whitman as an anonymous self-reviewer was in an unsigned review in the *New York Daily Times* in 1856 that called Whitman an “original thinker and blind egotist.” The *Daily Times* reviewer seems to have taken the *Albion*’s “pleasant quiz” and extended it to another review as well: “On subsequently comparing the critiques from the *United States Review* and the *Phrenological Journal* with the preface of the *Leaves of Grass*, we discovered unmistakable internal evidence that Mr. WALT WHITMAN, true to his character as a Kosmos, was not content with writing a book, but was also determined to review it; so Mr. WALT WHITMAN, had

concocted both those criticisms of his own work, treating it we need not say how favorably.” The *Daily Times* reviewer kept turning the knife: “this rowdy knight-errant who tilts against all lies and shams, himself perpetrates a lie and a sham at the very outset of his career. It is a lie to write a review of one’s own book, then extract it from the work in which it appeared and send it out to the world as an impartial editorial utterance.” That is exactly what Whitman did, of course, when he reprinted and appended all three of his known self-reviews to late issues of the first edition and then included two of them in the “Leaves-Droppings” section of his 1856 edition. But Whitman did something more. He took the scathing *New York Daily Times* exposé of his self-reviewing dishonesty (“It is an act that the most degraded helot of literature might blush to commit. It is a dishonesty committed against one’s own nature, and all the world”) and included it, along with all three incriminating reviews, in *Leaves of Grass Imprints*, the advertising brochure issued by Thayer and Eldridge to publicize the 1860 *Leaves*.²

It was not until just after Whitman’s death, when his literary executors (Horace L. Traubel, Richard Maurice Bucke, and Thomas B. Harned) issued an odd volume called *In Re Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1893), that the ultimate admission of Whitman’s anonymous self-reviewing appeared. Among the essays, poems, and reminiscences about Whitman, the executors presented the three formerly anonymous self-reviews, now with the byline of “Walt Whitman,” along with an explanatory note, admitting that these three reviews were “written by Walt Whitman within the year following the issue of the first edition of his poems” and suggesting that they “express in deliberate and emphatic form the root emotions and convictions out of which his book expanded and developed.” The editors go on: “Whitman has remarked to us that in a period of misunderstanding and abuse their publication seemed imperative. He consented before his death that they should here appear, as they have never elsewhere appeared, under his own name” (13). Thus Whitman apparently agreed, before his death, to be openly identified as what, in recent years (as authors have increasingly assumed Internet nom-de-plums), has been called a “sock puppet,” an author who under an assumed identity reviews his own work.³ Whitman’s assumed identity was always that of an “anonymous reviewer.”

The *Albion* article, along with many other recently discovered contemporary reviews of Whitman’s work, appears online in the “Criticism” section of the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org). All known reviews of Whitman’s work published during the poet’s lifetime are now available on the *Archive*, including a *Saturday Press* review of the 1860 *Leaves* that was reprinted from *The Albion*, consisting largely of a parody of Whitman’s poetry (June 2, 1860, p. 4).

NOTES

- 1 "A Pleasant Quiz," *The Albion: A Journal of News, Politics and Literature* 14.36 (September 8, 1855), 429. *The Albion* was founded in 1822 by a British naval surgeon, John Sherren Bartlett (1790-1863), who edited it for a quarter of a century. Bartlett served in the British navy during the War of 1812; his ship was captured by the U.S. frigate *President and Congress*, and he was taken to Boston as a prisoner of war. After the war, he married a Boston woman and set up medical practice there. He later moved to New York City, where he started *The Albion*, which specialized in bringing British news, politics, and culture to the U.S. and was known as an outlet for English conservative politics. Many naturalized Brits and Brits living in the U.S. subscribed to the journal, which was admired for the "premium engravings" that it offered subscribers each year, usually of a famous British figure, like Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, or Sir Walter Scott, though famous Americans and American scenes were also included. The *Boston Courier* (November 19, 1861) commented about *The Albion* that "the information which it imparts on foreign politics, or matters connected with science, literature, the arts, music, and the drama, is always well presented, whether original or selected." See Levi Bartlett, *Genealogical and Biographical Sketches of the Bartlett Family in England and America* (Lawrence: G.M. Merrill & Crocker, 1876), 91-92; Howard A. Kelly and Walter L. Burrage, *American Medical Biographies* (Baltimore: Norman, Remington, 1920), 66; *The Encyclopedia Americana* (New York: Encyclopedia Americana, 1918), 3:293; *Appleton's Cyclopedia of American Biography* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1888), 184.
- 2 See *Leaves of Grass Imprints* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 21.
- 3 See Tom Zeller, Jr., "Writers on the Web, Deprived of Masks and Pride," *New York Times* (September 11, 2006).